

# U.S. Chargé d'Affaires Adept at Indian Languages, Cuisine



**Peter A. Burleigh**  
*Chargé d'Affaires of the U.S. Embassy*

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**L**earning to cook in Bengal and Lucknow, reading newspapers in Hindi, chatting with monks in Sinhala, writing the history of medieval Nepali kings—Peter A. Burleigh, chargé d'affaires of the U.S. Embassy, has immersed himself in South Asian culture since his first experiences as a Peace Corps volunteer and Fulbright scholar convinced him to spend his life as a diplomat.

"While I was on the Fulbright in Nepal I took the Foreign Service exam and then spent 33 years in the Foreign Service," says Burleigh, during a brief break in the non-stop, seven-day-a-week schedule he has been keeping since his April 6 appointment by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. He is interim chargé until a U.S. ambassador to India can be nominated by President Barack Obama and confirmed by the U.S. Senate. "I am highly positive about the Fulbright program. When I have been serving in various posts, including in Sri Lanka, India and Nepal, I have always been active on Fulbright boards and have encouraged those local academics and graduate students, but also Americans, who participate in the two-way flow of the Fulbright program. It was really a major event in my life."

The Fulbright program has expanded exponentially since the 1960s when Burleigh was the only student grantee in Nepal one year. "The fact that the government of India is contributing funds to the program here is a major advance, and both countries value this kind of exchange...and better understanding of each other's societies," says Burleigh. "The program here in India now reflects real partnership."

When Burleigh was posted at the U.S. Consulate General in Calcutta in 1972-1975, "those were days when U.S.-India relations were marginal and there was a lot of mutual suspicion between our two governments. I am amazed at the transformation from a very minimal and fragile relationship in almost every area

to people-to-people relations and government-to-government relations that have now flowered and bloomed incredibly, broad and deep, and it seems like it's expanding all the time."

Since his retirement in 2000, after serving as ambassador to Sri Lanka and in other posts, Burleigh has been to India 15 times, studying history, architecture and cooking. In one class in Kolkata in 2006 he was the only man in a group learning Bengali cuisine. "Now in all the big cities there are cooking classes for young women who are about to get married, who are highly educated but who have not learned the traditional housekeeping skills," Burleigh says. "So it was a hilarious experience, we had a lot of fun and we learned Bengali cooking, me and about 15 young women."

At home in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, Burleigh cooks every weekend. "I do Indian food, I cook huge amounts and have friends over and I have leftovers for two or three nights. You know Indian food frequently tastes better the second and third night, when there is more time for the spices to seep into the meat and vegetables." All the ingredients, except for a particular type of leaf needed for Maharashtra and Karnataka cuisine, are available in South Florida. "In my small city we have three Indian markets all owned and run by Gujarati families, immigrants to the United States."

Burleigh speaks several languages of India. There's Nepali, which he picked up as a Peace Corps volunteer and Fulbrighter and later as U.S. deputy chief of mission in Nepal. He learned to speak, read and write in Bengali, gave interviews in Sinhala and has "a kind of *desi* Hindi, in which the words are not grammatically very pure, but I can speak and understand it, I can read the Hindi language newspapers." Burleigh adds a caution, however, to anyone who may meet him during his tenure. "I am avoiding being tested in any one of these languages because I find myself rusty in all of them."

—L.K.L.

#### For more information:

United States-India Educational Foundation

<http://www.usief.org.in/>

U.S. Embassy, New Delhi

<http://newdelhi.usembassy.gov/>

*Peter A. Burleigh meets women and children in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, who receive free health care under a USAID program.*



KERRY PELZMAN/USAID